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April 7, 2023

Chairman Sam Graves
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
2165 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Rick Larson
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
2163 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Graves and Ranking Member Larsen:

As you begin to draft a Pipelines Safety reauthorization bill, I request that you include legislation to strengthen pipeline safety rules for automatic shut-off valves.

On March 31, 2022, the U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) announced a new rule to help improve pipeline safety that would require automatic shut-off valves for new pipelines. This was after years of Congress urging PHMSA to act and I was pleased to see them move forward with a final rule.

In 2011, Congress worked in a bipartisan way to pass the Pipeline Safety, Regulatory Certainty, and Job Creation Act. This law directed PHMSA to update and strengthen key pipeline safety standards. The law called on PHMSA to issue a rule requiring the installation of automatic and remote-control shutoff valves and leak detection technology after PHMSA and its predecessor agency, the Research and Special Program Agency (RSPA) failed to adopt safety recommendations issued from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) more than 20 years ago. In September 2017, the House of Representatives passed an amendment I authored to the fiscal year 2018 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations bill, requiring updated automatic shut-off valves and leak detection standards for oil and gas pipelines.

However, the new rule adopted by PHMSA last year would only apply to new pipelines—and not existing pipelines. This means that threats of another disastrous oil spill remain. Including all pipelines to adopt automatic valve shut-off safety rules, would help mitigate any oil spills by helping respond immediately. Previous spills have shown us the need for these safety rules. For example, the May 19, 2015 Plains All American Pipeline oil spill, near Refugio Beach and off Santa Barbara County spilled over 100,000 gallons of crude oil into our oceans and shut down commercial fisheries. It took operators over two hours to detect the source of the Plains' Line 901 spill.

In 1995, after investigating the Texas Eastern Transmission Corporation (TETCO) pipeline explosion, in which 1,500 local residents were evacuated after escaped natural gas ignited and sent flames 400 feet into the air, the NTSB recommended that the RSPA “expedite requirements for installing automatic – or remote-operated mainline valves on high-pressure pipelines in urban and environmentally sensitive areas to provide for rapid shutdown of failed pipeline segments.”

While an automatic shutoff valve may not stop an oil spill from happening, it can mitigate some of the damage on our communities. I represent communities that have been directly impacted by oil spills. Not only do they pollute our oceans, kill wildlife, but are also costly in clean-up costs shuttered fisheries. Therefore, I urge you to include strong pipeline safety language that directs PHMSA to include automatic valve shut-off requirements for all existing pipelines.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Salud Carbajal", with a stylized, cursive script.

Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress